

SIX CAMPAIGNS IN THE DESERT

By LIEUTENANT M. ANDREONE, R.I.N.

The war in Africa lasted from June 11, 1940, to May 12, 1943, that is, almost three years. In looking back on it we can see many things more clearly today than at the time when they occurred. We know now that this war was unique in history, with its strange pendulum swings of three pairs of offensives over a battlefield more than a thousand kilometers long and only a few kilometers wide; and the important role these desert campaigns have played in the present World War has now become discernible.

At our request, Lieutenant Andreone of the Royal Italian Navy tells the story of these three years. His article is the first complete account of this war to appear in Shanghai.—K.M.

THE war in Africa started, like any other modern war, with activity on land, on sea, and in the air. It began more or less as a study of the enemy, as an effort at contacting him and destroying, especially by air, his vital points, which were sometimes far removed from the real front.

On the Tunisian-Libyan front some small encounters of no importance took place. On June 20, France having asked for an armistice, all fighting ceased along that border, while it continued on a minor scale on the Libyan-Egyptian front. After Air Marshal Italo Balbo, the Governor of Libya, was killed in action on June 30, Marshal Rodolfo Graziani of Abyssinian fame took over the command of the Italian operations. General Sir Archibald P. Wavell was the Commander in Chief of the British forces in the Middle East.

War in the desert was nothing new for the British and the Italians. The question was: would the desert war be influenced by the experiences of the European war in 1939 and 1940? But these experiences were of too recent date for them to have been adapted to desert warfare; the war started more or less on the old lines. It is true that the two armies were mechanized—to a certain extent the motor had taken the place of the camel—that they were more numerous in men and had a bigger range of action.

But the old dogmas of bases, lines of communication, etc., were still considered the foundations of desert warfare, thus limiting the possibilities of the new army of the desert. Consequently, not much happened at first. The two air forces bombed each other's bases of supply, the Italians pounded Malta, British convoys, and the Suez Canal, and the enemy attacked the bases in Libya and southern Italy.

THE FIRST ITALIAN OFFENSIVE . . .

Marshal Graziani started the first offensive on August 13, 1940. In his first push he did not try any complicated strategic maneuvers but applied superior forces at one point and succeeded in his aim. His army was quite small and consisted of three infantry regiments, one machine-gun battalion, one company equipped with mortars, one artillery regiment, and some technical units, with support from the air but not from the sea. Additional troops were stationed in various parts of Libya.

His well-balanced force advanced from Fort Capuzzo across the border to Sollum. The defenders were Britons, Australians, New Zealanders, South Africans, and Indians. General Wavell fell back, and the Italian column pushed on until, on December 17, it occupied Sidi Barrani, 120 kilometers inside Egypt, taking up positions at Maktila, a few kilometers

east of Sidi Barrani. The British retreated with their tanks, armored cars, and planes; they dynamited and salted the wells, but the attackers were supplied with water trucks and condensing apparatus. All this time, widespread and repeated bombings were carried out by both air forces, and the British Navy also joined in the fray, shelling the Italian positions along the Egyptian coast.

. . . AND BRITISH COUNTERPUSH

Meanwhile, in Cairo, General Wavell prepared a counteroffensive in great secrecy and reinforced his army, bringing troops to Egypt from the Near East. The British offensive was well planned and even better executed by an army 40,000 men strong known as the Nile Army. The attack came as a surprise to Graziani, owing to the fact that the Nile Army succeeded in approaching and deploying around the battlefield completely unnoticed, making good use of the night and of a sandstorm blowing at the time. The attack began on December 10, 1940. The British armored units drove concentrically on Sidi Barrani, while another column drove past, pointing on Bugbug. First to sustain the impact of the motorized columns of the enemy were the Libyan divisions to the south of the town, which resisted bravely but were overpowered. Their commander, General Pietro Maletti, died on the field. The Italians were now attacked on all sides: on land by armored columns, from the sea by the British fleet that had steamed out of Alexandria, and from the air by the British Air Force which had obtained superiority. Sidi Barrani fell the same day. A large number of prisoners and much material were captured.

The enemy's success was made possible by the fact that the battle array of Graziani's forces had not been extended deep enough into the desert. Thus the encirclement of his forces could be effected within a few hours during the night and the British fleet could intervene effectively. Added to this fault in the Italian positions there was a marked superiority of the Nile Army in men,

material, and aviation. The enemy's superiority in mechanized units and tanks especially enabled General Wavell to exploit his initial success to the utmost.

Owing to the heavy losses on the Italian side, the advance of the Nile Army became relatively easy, the more so since it was constantly supported by the Navy, which shelled the Italian positions along the African coast. Bardia, attacked by land and sea, fell on January 5, and Tobruk on January 22. The fall of Tobruk, the stronghold of the Italian defense system in Libya, precipitated matters, and the enemy proceeded rapidly westward, with two British columns advancing, one along the coast and the other south of the Djebel through El Mechili. On February 6, Benghazi surrendered, and the two columns jointly proceeded southwest to Agedabia and El Agheila, where they arrived on February 11. In spite of this British advance, however, Graziani's offensive had not been a complete failure, for the few Italian divisions in Africa had compelled England at a very critical moment,—namely, after Dunkirk—to dispatch large numbers of men and tanks to Egypt.

England was glowing with her first victory of the war; but there was something to mar the rejoicing: while the British columns were marching on Agedabia, they had been attacked for the first time by German planes. Furthermore, unconfirmed reports that had already been circulating for two months placed 30,000 German troops in Libya, with another 50,000 waiting in Italy or en route. The British Navy warned that, in view of the heavy Axis traffic in the central Mediterranean, the Axis might be contemplating a counterattack in Libya.

At the end of March, Marshal Graziani was relieved of his command at his own request and replaced by General Italo Gariboldi. For the Axis position in North Africa this was a dangerous moment. But it passed. Instead of attempting to push on into Libya, the British diverted part of their forces for the Balkan

adventure. The Axis recognized its chance and hit back.

ROMMEL APPEARS ON THE SCENE

The third phase of the Libyan campaign was now about to start. The new Axis command did not allow the Nile Army any breathing space or time to consolidate the positions it had captured. As early as March 27 the first successful encounter of German Panzers with British troops south of Agedabia was reported. This was nearly 150 kilometers to the rear of the most advanced British position at El Agheila. The Nile Army did not know whether it was coming or going.

The Axis offensive was under way. The first result was achieved by an Italo-German mechanized division under the command of General Erwin Rommel, a German Panzer expert. In a giant raid and by means of outflanking tactics, this force took El Agheila, the desert outpost of Marsa el Brega, and Agedabia. The British High Command diagnosed the situation promptly and correctly, and by April 3 it had already given the order to evacuate Benghazi, although no Axis troops were yet in sight. The Italo-German forces carried on at top speed, a small column arriving at El Regima, some 20 kilometers east of Benghazi, just in time to cut off the retreat of the Indian rearguard. By this time the

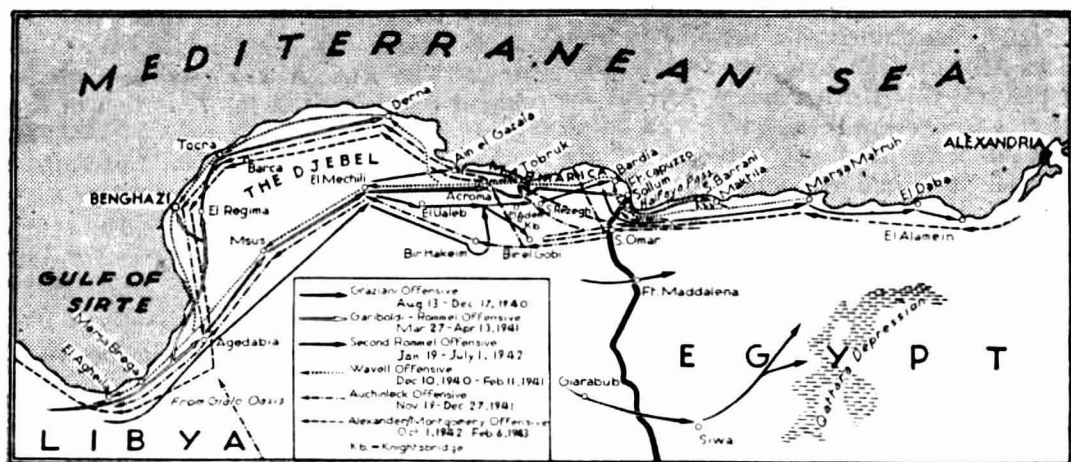
offensive had turned into a race between Axis and British troops. Tocra and Barca fell in rapid succession, and on April 9 Derna was in Axis hands.

The main Panzer column pushed from Msus to El Mechili. On its way it captured several British generals—among them General Sir Richard Nugent O'Connor, who had been knighted one month earlier for his brilliance as field commander of the Nile Army during the winter campaign—and many men. To complete the success there was need of boldness, and the Axis command showed no lack of that. With great recklessness as far as the lines of communication were concerned, it charged past Tobruk with its British garrison, captured Bardia and, without stopping, reached Sollum on April 13.

In six days the ground which the British troops had needed eight weeks to cover was recaptured. By the end of the month and with apparent ease, the Axis army drove the British out of Sollum, advancing 10 kilometers into Egyptian territory and occupying Halfaya Pass, the gate to Libya.

TWO NEW IDEAS

The Gariboldi-Rommel offensive of March and April 1941 was something new in the Libyan war. In his westward offensive General Wavell had directed a



Three pairs of campaigns in North Africa

column from Tobruk to the south of the Djebel; but this was a secondary force, sent with the idea of carrying material and foodstuffs to the coast of the Gulf of Sirte for the main column that was advancing and fighting along the coast. The new Axis command conceived the strategical idea that by employing the main force to cut at the base of the peninsula of Barca it would automatically achieve the fall of the entire peninsula. Consequently, the Axis column following the coast was nothing but a mopping-up unit.

In the logistic field (i.e., the field of military transport and supplies), the Axis command had the revolutionary idea of exploiting its success to the limit, without any thought of the lines of communication, which would be organized after the military objectives had been achieved.

The main result of the campaign was that England, whose attention and forces were concentrated on the war in Europe, was thus compelled to distract her thoughts and power from the main theater of operations. This was exactly what the Axis powers had intended. The Italo-German offensive had coincided with the crucial period of the Balkan campaign, and some of the best British troops had to be diverted against the Axis in Marmarica.

THE SIEGE OF TOBRUK

In Cairo, General Wavell called a war council, while troops were passing daily through Alexandria on their way from East Africa to the Egyptian front. During April the British made several attempts to liberate besieged Tobruk, interspersed with frequent attacks on the frontier and one attempted landing in the neighborhood of Bardia. But all to no avail.

Nevertheless, Tobruk was a thorn in the side of the Axis command, and at the beginning of May the Italo-Germans carried out an attack against the fortress. They broke through the first line of defense, capturing a great number of artillery emplacements, knocking out a score of tanks, and seizing prisoners.

But the British fell back to the second line of defense, which withstood the Axis onslaught.

Why the lull in the war of movement? It had become a war of material; both opponents were stacking up with arms of every kind; the war in the desert had already proved to be a very costly one in arms, and superiority in material was one of the keys to victory. In May, Cairo reported for the first time the arrival of American material. It was said that no less than 26 US merchantmen, piled up to the funnels with war material and convoyed by US naval vessels, had reached Suez. On the other hand, the British one day discovered over 100 Junker transport planes on an airfield near Benghazi; they were the same type as had already been used in Greece to land field artillery and armored cars behind the enemy lines.

Meanwhile, Tobruk was still withstanding the Axis siege. The besieged fortress received its supplies by sea and, even though it was a thorn in the side of the Axis, it was certainly also very expensive for the enemy. Every convoy en route or that had reached the roadstead was attacked from the air, the score ranging from three transports hit to four ships and a cruiser sunk.

With the siege of Tobruk and the presence of Axis troops in Egypt, with the anesthetization of Malta by the Axis air forces and the necessity of reinforcing General Wavell's troops, Great Britain had arrived at a critical moment of the war. The African Mediterranean chess-board demanded all the attention of the London general staff and the pick of the British land, air, and naval forces, and all the best resources of the Empire were dumped on African soil. To the Axis, Africa—the outpost of Europe—was fulfilling its task in a manner superior to all expectations.

TANK BATTLE IN THE DESERT

After a May rehearsal at freeing Tobruk, the British High Command decided in the middle of June that something decisive had to be done to stop this

long-drawn-out siege. England judged that, at the cost of enormous sacrifices, she had accumulated enough men and armaments to ensure the defeat of the Italo-German forces in Egypt. General Wavell decided to add skill to might by adopting a maneuver based on the Axis command's principle of "keeping deep into the desert."

With a feint at Halfaya Pass, the tank battle started at Sidi Omar, 50 kilometers from the coast, with the obvious idea of turning the Axis positions of Bardia, Sollum, and Halfaya Pass. For three days the battle swirled in the desert. Both sides fought gallantly, but on the third day the enemy, after losing nearly 50 per cent of his armored cars, was thrown back to where he came from. The British could not outmaneuver the Axis command, and the superiority in tanks had not been great enough to decide the battle in their favor. This battle postponed the offensive by five precious months, during which England had to accept new sacrifices to divert more material to the African shores.

Lieutenant General Erwin Rommel was promoted to the rank of full general, while General Wavell was sent to India and replaced by General Claude J. Auchinleck. The war continued on a minor scale on the Egyptian frontier, as the Tobruk garrison made attempts every month to break the steel ring around the town.

VAST ASSAULT

The next phase in the Libyan campaign started on November 19, 1941, when enemy motorized and armored units attacked the Axis positions in Marmarica on a 100-kilometer front. With a decisive countermove, the Italian Ariete division surrounded and destroyed part of the enemy units at the end of the first day, compelling the rest to fall back. The battle continued to rage as Italo-German motorized units passed to the counterattack, destroying numerous tanks and taking prisoners.

At the same time the Tobruk front flared up with the enemy again trying to break the siege. As the battle grew

in violence in the Tobruk/Bir el Gobi/Sidi Omar/Sollum square, an enemy mechanized column was sighted in the far south of the desert and attacked by Italo-German air squadrons. On the Sollum front the Italian Savona division was heavily engaged and withstood all enemy attacks. The enemy losses were high, and the commander of the 4th Tank Brigade, General Sperling, was captured. In the meantime, the enemy mechanized units sighted a few days before in the far south reached Gialo Oasis, 200 kilometers south-southeast of Agedabia and captured it a few days later.

By the end of the month the Savona division on the Sollum front had broken up all attacks; the important position of Sidi Omar had been recaptured; Bardia was firmly in Axis hands, although attacked during the battle by enemy units; and the Tobruk garrison remained encircled. However, the Axis High Command was fighting under unfavorable conditions: the enemy had an enormous superiority in mechanized units; Tobruk was in the hands of the enemy; and the Axis supplies had to come from Benghazi and Tripoli, 300 and 1,500 kilometers away respectively. Moreover, the long sweep taken by the enemy in the southern desert through Gialo Oasis was a potential threat.

QUANTITY TELLS

Although the battle was still being fought at the beginning of December in the Sollum/Sidi Rezegh/Sidi Omar area, with success for the Italo-German forces (which captured General Reginald Miles), the enemy was also south of the Djebel. In spite of the heroic resistance put up by the Italo-German forces, the enemy gradually advanced westward. The British were incessantly supplied with new forces; the battle was one of materials and supply, and the British had the superiority. In the second half of December all the Djebel with Derna and Benghazi, was evacuated, but Bardia and Sollum, although cut off from the main Axis force, stubbornly kept on repulsing all enemy attacks up to January 15, 1942.

The British had succeeded in removing the threat to Suez, but at what cost? The battle was won by sheer numbers. The Axis command's transport difficulties and the American material thrown into the fray without regard to loss en route were the key to the British victory. The battle was won, not by any special strategy, but simply by the enormous reserves at the disposal of General Wavell. The exaggeration of the principle of "marching deep into the desert" represented by the sweep of the enemy column through Gialo Oasis did not carry much weight in the final outcome of the battle. As it had to cover about 500 kilometers through sheer desert, the column could not be powerful enough; and, arriving in a worn-out condition to the southwest of Agedabia, it was unable to prevent the orderly evacuation of the Barca peninsula by the Axis forces.

A MASTERPIECE OF STRATEGY

The Axis command was now faced by a tough problem. The enemy's superiority in material and men was bound to remain if not increase in the future, while the Axis had the usual difficulties of transportation, the chronic ailment of all these African campaigns. How to beat the powerful foe under such conditions?

That is why the next offensive of General Rommel is the battle supreme of the entire African war, the masterpiece that opposed skill and strategy to steel and numbers and came out victorious. The new Axis offensive got under way on January 19, 1942, three weeks after the arrival of the enemy. This did not give much respite to the British troops that had covered 500 kilometers from Sidi Omar, fighting hard all the way.

The start of this third Axis offensive reveals another principle of the Axis command, namely, striking hard and unexpectedly, thus pushing the enemy off his balance in spite of his numerical superiority. The principle is as old as the world; the merit of the Axis command is that it has used it to perfection.

On the first day of the offensive the enemy was already pushed back east of

Agedabia. Next Benghazi was reached and the drive carried on in heavy rains past Derna, as the war booty increased and the enemy accelerated the tempo of his retreat in order to break contact. Then, unexpectedly, the Axis was faced by a strong line of defense stretching from Ain el Gazala to Bir Hakeim. Great masses of Allied forces, ready for an offensive, were poised on this line, the most advanced of the British alignment.

The Allied forces were composed of the Eighth Army, headed by General A. L. Ritchie who, under General Auchinleck, commanded a large army with 2,000 tanks, and 2,000 planes. The Axis forces counted several big Italian units, among them the Ariete and Trieste divisions, and the German Africa Corps under General Erwin Rommel. The Commander in Chief of the Italian forces was General Ettore Bastico, the new Governor of Libya. The developments of the ensuing battle enable us to reconstruct the objectives of the Axis command. They were:

- (1) To hold the British forces in Ain el Gazala and Acroma.
- (2) To thrust at Tobruk, turning the entire defensive system from the south.
- (3) To exploit the ensuing success.

The battlefield to be was the triangle Tobruk/Ain el Gazala/Bir Hakeim, a rocky plateau covered in part with shifting sand dunes and excellent for the defenders. After many weeks of careful preparation, the battle commenced on May 26 and, after four phases, ended on June 21.

THE TURNING OF A LINE

The preliminary phase was opened by Italian troops that hurled themselves against El Ualeb and forced a breach across the first defensive barrier. At the same time, concentrations of Italo-German armored units arrived in front of Bir Hakeim, while other units, turning from the south, encircled the system and then, pushed north towards Knightsbridge.

On June 11 the defenders of Bir Hakeim capitulated, and the second

phase of the battle commenced. With Bir Hakeim secured, the Axis troops to the north of this locality proceeded towards the coast behind El Gazala and eastward towards El Adem. The going was by no means easy, and a huge tank battle developed in the triangle Acroma/Knightsbridge/El Adem. General Ritchie, evidently thinking that the Axis troops were at the end of their tether, threw in his last reserves. But the engagement was concluded with a smashing victory for the Axis. Ain el Gazala was cut off and 6,000 prisoners captured. El Adem was overwhelmed, and the enemy fled toward Egypt.

The encirclement of Tobruk on June 18 started the third phase of the battle. Incessantly hammered from land and air, Tobruk fell in four days with the surrender of 6 British generals, 33,000 men, and piles of supplies, fuel, war material, etc. General Ritchie was abruptly dismissed. This time the British Navy, which had suffered heavy losses by Italian naval assault units in the harbor of Alexandria at the beginning of the year, did not make any attempt to relieve Tobruk.

The fourth phase was completed in two days with the occupation of Fort Capuzzo, Sollum, and Halfaya Pass. This time these strongholds were to be had for the asking. On and on went the Axis offensive, deeper and deeper into Egypt. Sidi Barrani and Marsa Matruh were passed, and El Alamein, 100 kilometers from Alexandria, was reached on July 1. Later it became known that the Axis had not intended to advance this far. But the unexpected booty, particularly in trucks and gasoline, was so great that the advance was carried much further than originally planned.

Great Britain seethed with indignation; the Government had to ask for a vote of confidence in the House of Commons. General Auchinleck was replaced by General Sir Harold R. L. Alexander; and Generals Bastico and Rommel were promoted to the rank of marshal. Deep in the desert, Giarabub Oasis, that had fallen to the enemy on February 18, 1941,

after an epic defense of eighty days, was recaptured by Axis troops which proceeded east to Siwa Oasis.

Is it just a coincidence, or is there something more to it that the new Axis offensive corresponded chronologically to events of great importance in other war theaters? In East Asia, British and American troops, beaten by the Japanese, were asking for help; on the vast plains of the Don and Volga the Soviets were crumbling and asking for help; but all these cries for help were lost in London and Washington because the African war sector, after two years of war, was swallowing up the most imposing concentration of the combined British and American war effort. The magnetic needle of the war compass still pointed to the African sector, as the much-vaunted Allied strategy of "Europe First" had to be turned into an "Africa First."

2,000 KILOMETERS

A glance at the map shows that, with Tobruk and Benghazi destroyed by the previous fighting, the nearest harbor for landing heavy material from Italy was Tripoli, 2,000 kilometers away. Although the Axis command had proved itself successful so far in its heretical attitude toward the old logistic dogmas concerning lines of communication, this figure was prohibitive for any command. Alexandria is a fortified city, and a real attack could not be improvised. There was need of material, ammunition, and men, of reorganizing the troops after so long an advance, and the old handicap of the Axis command, the problem of transportation, was ever present. Moreover, there were growing indications that an Allied attack on West Africa was imminent.

Thus in September the war settled down at El Alamein on a mere 50-kilometer front between the sea and the marshy depression of Qattara. The Allies continued to bring up all forces available, and the concentration of artillery and arms on the short front was terrific. The Axis command made its first bid in October, attacking in force and opening

a wide passage through the mine fields, penetrating for a depth of 10 kilometers into the enemy system, and then suddenly returning to its own positions.

General Sir Harold Alexander, the new Commander in Chief of the Allied forces in the Middle East, and General Bernard L. Montgomery, the commander of the Eighth Army, then in turn made their bid at the El Alamein front. Just as a man who, unable to move a weight too heavy for his strength, applies all his might at various points, so General Alexander repeatedly concentrated his attack and all his strength alternatively on the north and south of the 50-kilometer front. After a battle lasting one week, with a generosity of artillery shelling never experienced before, the Axis troops gave ground, taking up positions east of Marsa Matruh. Again the Axis command disregarded the old logistic dogmas by keeping deep into the desert instead of using the much more comfortable coastal road. In this way the British fleet had no chance to intervene.

PLANS ARE CHANGED

On November 8 the Anglo-Americans landed in Algeria, and whatever the plans of the Axis High Command in Libya may have been they had to be entirely modified. The German Africa Corps and the Italian troops started to execute a withdrawal as skillful and bold from the military point of view as the previous advance. General Montgomery had little merit in forcing the retreat although he jumped to the pursuit hoping that the chance would finally arrive of destroying an enemy who, apparently beaten, came back each time stronger than ever.

The objectives of the two sides were now of the simplest. For the Axis they were: to retire through Libya to Tunisia, there to join the small forces brought there by air, to save men and material as much as possible, and to destroy what was left behind. For the British: to frustrate the Axis plan and destroy the enemy forces. The maneuver of falling back from El Alamein to the Tunisian frontier will go down in military history

as one of the most perfect of its kind. For about three months the powerful enemy armored forces again and again tried unsuccessfully to encircle the right wing of the Axis forces, sustaining heavy losses in the course of this. Moreover, the Axis rearguard stopped its withdrawal time and again to hit back at the enemy.

At the beginning of December the two opposing forces were once again—for the third time in this war—facing each other in the El Agheila/Marsa/Brega region. Land fighting was confined to minor actions, while the Axis aviation wrought havoc on the congested supply line of the Eighth Army.

The British press was demanding a twin offensive against the African Axis forces, from the east and from the west. But things were not going very well for the Allies in Tunisia; and in the east, General Montgomery, cautious before, was now overcautious in the ill-famed El Agheila region. The compromise between the British High Command and the English press was to order a "Free French" column, composed of mechanized units and a camel corps under the command of General Leclercq, to march north from Lake Chad. The "Free French" were probably very surprised at being asked to attack something that was not French.

On January 18, General Montgomery reported to Cairo that the vanguard of the French column had contacted the left wing of the British Eighth Army. The Axis troops continued their systematic withdrawal. Tripoli was evacuated on January 22; and at the beginning of February the fighting moved to the Tunisian-Libyan frontier, as the main Axis forces took up positions at the Mareth line, which they consolidated.

TURNING BACK TO NOVEMBER 1942

At this point we must return once more to the days early in November 1942. At that time General Alexander was piling up material for his offensive against Rommel. When news from La Linea announced two huge convoys, strongly protected, to be sailing east,

it was generally assumed that they were bound for Egypt. The French possessions in North Africa were basking quietly in the winter sun, outwardly obedient to the Vichy Government. Thus, when the two apparently Egypt-bound convoys started landing operations on the Algerian coast, it came as a surprise to the world.

A few hours after the Allied naval units put into the port of Algiers, Italian torpedo planes were already on their return trip, having bagged at least one cruiser. The Axis reaction grew stronger every hour, while the enemy retaliated on the Italian bases of Sicily, Sardinia, and southern Italy. An aerial-naval battle of the first magnitude developed all along the North African coast, even inside the breakwaters of the Algerian harbors, where submarines penetrated. Axis planes of every description hammered shipping, port installations, and airfields. In their *coup de main* the Allies were using their best ships—large-sized liners—and the toll of tons sent to the bottom increased rapidly. Every convoy was spotted, and every convoy was attacked. 827 Italian planes and an unknown number of German aircraft took part in the struggle.

NO WALKOVER

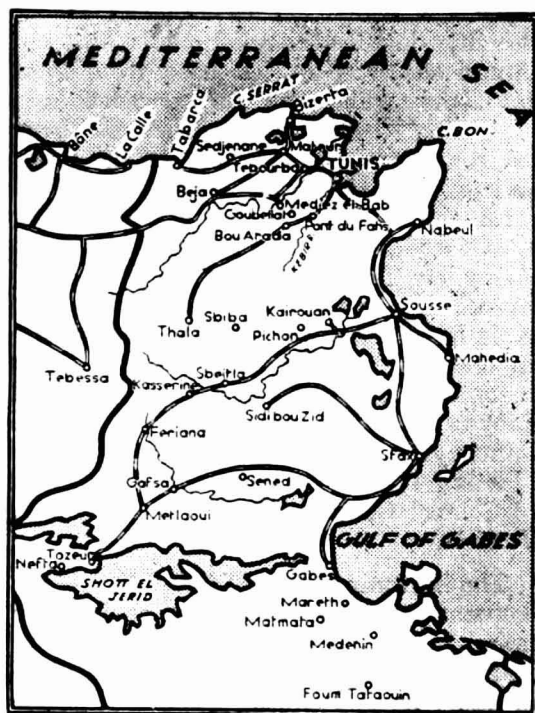
The enemy was shaken in his dream of an easy success when on November 15 he learned that the first Axis contingent of 238 men had been landed in Tunisia by planes. The first handful was rapidly increased by new sea- and airborne troops, which on landing did not lose any time in rushing at the enemy marching toward Tunis and Bizerta and snatching away before the very eyes of the foe the focal points of the Tunisian theater of operations. The first reports from this new battle front were most confusing. The easternmost point of the Allied landing seemed to be Bougie, 150 kilometers east of Algiers. From there the enemy was reported to be marching east in three main columns: one in the north not far from the coast, the central column following the railway Pont du Fahs/Tunis, and the third further south.

One week after the landing, the Axis command announced that Bizerta was in Axis hands; in London, Ivan Maisky, the Soviet Ambassador, declared that the North African landing could not be considered the second front it was claimed to be; and the Allied command estimated the Axis troops ferried across the Sicily channel at 14,000 men.

Toward the end of November, the front, according to Allied headquarters, began at a point located on the northern coast 40 miles west of Bizerta, ran south-eastward along the railway to the vicinity of Mateur, and from there to Pont du Fahs; further to the south it is impossible to trace a front, but all of the Tunisian coast up to the Libyan frontier was in Axis hands, and the Axis air force dominated the Tunisian skies. The Allied coup against Tunisia had been stalled.

TUNISIAN MUDDLE

On November 24, General Anderson, commanding the British First Army, announced the beginning of a great battle for Tunis and Bizerta. But the great battle turned into a muddle on the second



day and petered out on the third. The Allied command postponed its attack and waited for reinforcements. The first real battle for Tunis and Bizerta started on December 3, when a British infantry and tank division, reinforced by an American motorized division, renewed the bid for Tunis along the Tebourba road. The Italo-German forces stopped the tank spearhead; their aviation blasted the road clean of enemy tanks as the land forces passed to the counterattack, occupying Tebourba, pushing further west and folding up the remnants of the three divisions on the lower spurs of the Atlas Mountains. The enemy also dropped a contingent of 600 paratroopers between Tunis and Bizerta, but the Italians captured 29 officers and 210 men and annihilated the rest. The Anglo-American indignation over the failure mounted, not so much in London—where they were accustomed to bad news—as in America, where the press stressed the need of a twin offensive. Christmas Day found the Americans in the hills north of Medjez el Bab, busy hurling counterattacks against the advancing Axis troops in a futile endeavor to stop them.

In the south, "Free French" troops recently detached to reinforce the battered Americans were hurled back from Pont du Fahs, while still further south the American troops were dislodged from Kairouan and pushed west up the lower hills of the Atlas range. The year closed with the British War Office admitting that the daring coup of the British First Army on Tunis and Bizerta had failed by a hair's breadth. Acting swiftly, the Axis had succeeded in three things: first in creating a bridgehead around Tunis; secondly in maintaining a corridor toward Libya; and thirdly, toward the end of January, in establishing contact between Marshal Rommel's army and the troops of Colonel General Jürgen von Arnim in Tunisia.

The beginning of 1943 found the Allied command in North Africa asking for more men, more weapons, and more planes, which had all to be transported in badly needed ships.

SUCCESSFUL DELAYING ACTIONS

The arrival of Marshal Rommel's troops in the Tunisian theater of operations compelled the Allies to revise their battle formation. The American Fifth Army now had to assume a new direction of movement, shifting the bulk of its forces toward the southeast in the direction of the Gulf of Gabes. The American Fifth Army was to advance from central Tunisia to the coast of the Gulf of Gabes and in this way to cut through the junction of Marshal Rommel with Colonel General von Arnim. The chief characteristic of the new Allied command, headed by General Dwight Eisenhower, was a justified caution in the face of a resolute enemy.

Once more the Axis interfered with Allied plans, when a sudden, vigorous Italo-German offensive in February led to the occupation of Gafsa, Sbeitla, Kasserine, and Feriana, with the Axis troops reaching the western extremity of Shott el Jerid. All the passes heading from the Atlas Mountains to the plains of central Tunisia were now occupied. Once again the key to the Axis success was quick decision and rapidity in striking. The American Fifth Army retired behind the Tunisian-Algerian border. Many prisoners and huge booty had fallen into the hands of the Axis, and the frustration of General Eisenhower's plan to establish contact between the Fifth and Eighth Armies was extremely important from a strategic point of view.

March began quietly. On March 11, Marshal Rommel was recalled by the Führer. The Americans were putting out feelers toward the regions occupied by the Axis, and in the south and north the First and Eighth Armies were preparing for a co-ordinated offensive. But General von Arnim was first. He attached the First Army and occupied Cape Serrat and Sedjenane, inflicting heavy losses in men and material on the enemy and relieving the pressure on Bizerta. In the south, the Italo-German forces upset the plans of the Eighth Army by striking hard at it before it in turn was ready. But in the central

sector the Americans had meanwhile received strong reinforcements. They returned to the attack with a big tank force. In order to avoid encirclement, the Africa Corps retired to the isthmus between Gabes and Shott el Jerid.

MASSSES REPLACE STRATEGY

Ever since the junction of the Africa Corps with the Axis armies in Tunisia toward the end of January, and particularly since the Axis victories in February, the Allied High Command had realized that it had a big fight on its hands with an enemy who used his small forces with admirable skill and to the utmost advantage. It was decided in future to avoid battles on an equal footing and instead to choke the Axis forces by pressing them with such overwhelming masses of troops and steel that all the skill of their commanders, all the courage and experience of their veteran soldiers, would be of no avail to them. Thus all through February and March large armies and armaments were amassed. Not only all of the British war effort was now concentrated in Tunisia, but that of the Americans as well.

At the end of March the Allies were ready. A gigantic struggle began to rage along the entire Tunisian front. Under the impact of terrific Allied artillery bombardments, and in order to forestall the threat of being cut off by the reorganized and reinforced American Fifth Army, the Axis forces withdrew to the north. The enemy advance was kept at a slow pace by brilliant counterattacks and defensive action on the part of the rearguards. On April 1 the Gabes isthmus was evacuated for new positions further north; Sfax was abandoned on April 11, and Sousse four days later. The enemy had by now accumulated an enormous superiority in men and material. The pressure exerted all along the front line was continuous, and fighting went on without respite.

The front was now reduced to a line running from Cape Serrat in the north through Bou Arada to the coast north of

Sousse. During the third week of April, the left wing of the Axis was the chief target of attack. But the Italian divisions Pistoia, Folgore, and Trieste put up such a resistance that in the end the enemy had to desist from further attacks. The Allies gradually moved their center of gravity westward and then on to the northern sector.

At the end of April the entire front was aflame, with the Allies using fresh, strong tank and infantry forces, always trying to effect a break-through. But not until the enemy reached a superiority of seven to one in armored cars and three to one in artillery, without counting the superiority in planes, did he succeed in achieving the first break-through. On May 6 a strong enemy attack by massed infantry and tanks pierced the Axis lines on the road to Mateur and occupied the town. Tunis and Bizerta had to be evacuated on May 7. While the southern front still proved impassable to all enemy attacks, the Italo-German troops in the north fell back to an improvised line reaching from the Bay of Tunis to a point 25 kilometers east of Pont du Fahs. Two days later the enemy was able to break through this line and reach the coast southwest of Nabeul.

The Italian First Army, encircled east of Pont du Fahs, continued to fight tenaciously, counterattacking with indomitable courage. But in the other parts of the Tunisian front the Axis troops were compelled to cease fighting when their ammunition was exhausted. On May 11, General Messe, the commander of the Italian First Army, rejected a proposal to capitulate. But on the following day the situation became hopeless. Although the positions of the Italian army were still intact, its artillery fire slackened and then ceased for want of ammunition. All its material was destroyed. Any further sacrifice would have seemed useless, and the Duce ordered the Italian First Army, which had the honor of putting up the last resistance on African soil, to cease fighting.

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To evaluate the significance of the three years of African war, we must consider them in the light of the strategic situation of the rest of the world. If the Allies want to win the war, they must fight decisive battles on the European Continent and in East Asia. In order to

make Europe and East Asia impregnable to invasion, the Axis needed time, time to consolidate its great victories between September 1939 and June 1942. The task of gaining this time was entrusted to the Italian and German forces in North Africa. It was fulfilled by them against huge odds in an exemplary fashion.

THE SOUTHERN FLANK

The occupation of Tunisia by Allied forces has simplified the picture of the military situation in Europe. Just as there are no Allied troops on the European Continent (except at Gibraltar), so there are no longer any German or Italian armies beyond the borders of the Continent. The preliminaries are over, and the real battle can begin. The Allies no longer have any excuse for not attempting the establishment of a second front. They have 60,000 kilometers of Axis-controlled European coast line to choose from. This equals three times the length of the entire coast of Africa. The landing itself, of course, will be the least part of the enterprise. The Allies found this out at Dieppe. The real problem begins after a landing has been effected.

Whether, when, where, and how the Allies will try an invasion, we do not know. One possibility, however, is an attack from the south. The southern shore of Europe has so far been accorded little attention as, prior to the fall of Tunisia, an attack against it was most unlikely. The following article discusses not the problem of a second front in general but only this southern flank and the possibilities it offers for attack and defense.—K.M.

IT has happened but rarely that Europe has been invaded from the south across the wide moat of the Mediterranean, which separates southern Europe from Africa and the Near East. In historic times such invasions took place almost exclusively across the two narrowest portions of the moat—the Strait of Gibraltar (16 kilometers wide) and the Straits linking the Mediterranean with the Black Sea (the Dardanelles, 1.3 kilometers, and the Bosphorus, 0.66 kilometers wide at their narrowest points). One exception, the Persian landing at Marathon in 490 B.C., which was made from Asia Minor across the Aegean Sea, was a disastrous large-scale "Dieppe." But most invasions of Europe across the narrows—by the Persians across the Dardanelles in 480 and 479 B.C., and by the Carthaginians via Spain in the third century B.C.—also ended in disaster. Only two invasions of Europe from the south led to important successes, and both were the result of dissension and treason on the European side.

INVASION AND TREASON

Roderick, the last king of pre-Moorish Spain, had ascended the throne in a struggle with his predecessor King Witiza. In 711, the friends of Witiza called upon Tariq, a Moorish general in North Africa, to aid them against Roderick. They provided him with ships with which he was to cross the Strait of Gibraltar, and thought that he would go home once he had done his duty. Tariq came. Roderick was overwhelmed by the combined forces of the Moors and the Spanish followers of Witiza but, instead of returning to Africa, the Moors remained on European soil—eventually occupying the entire Iberian peninsula—for almost eight centuries, down to their final expulsion in 1492. The name of Tariq still lives to this day in the name of Gibraltar (Gebel al-Tariq = Rock of Tariq).

At the eastern end of Europe's southern flank, at a time when the Moorish control over Spain was on the wane, a child, John the Fifth Palaeologus, ascended the